

House of Stars

It's after the weekend when he moved out—after their fights; after he silently, angrily departed with most of his belongings; after her mother came over to soothe her, to cook for her in the void he left (most of their stuff was his); when the sink is filled with the waste and remains of what feels like her life; when all the most used pots and pans are caked and dirty on the counter—that she pulls a forgotten Teflon pan from the shelf, sets it on the stovetop where the eggs are ready to fry, and there it is, spinning, vibrating, whirring: a whole galaxy at the bottom of the frying pan.

Well, more than one galaxy, really, and as she holds the pan over the sink—deciding if she should dump it—she accidentally dribbles the edge of a star system out into the dishwasher, and it flows in a gooey mist down the drain. She stares for a long while, thinking. The largest galaxy—about the size of an apple—has arms spiraling outward, and beyond it she can see the dark dust clouds of interstellar space. Then, because she doesn't want to pour a whole universe down the drain, she fries the eggs in the pan, galaxies and all, and one cooks right over the spinning orb of a distant sun. The sun shines through the egg, so that it glows like a part of the galaxy.

That night, she removes the pan from the kitchen, still full with the galaxies and greasy from the eggs, stores it under her bed, and all night dreams of star fields and space travel. She wakes, excited, thinking, *Today, I'll use it to make pancakes*, but when she pours the batter into the pan's center, it's as if she's pouring it into oblivion. The stars, too, she notices, have moved, and she puts her face very close and watches as they're sucked toward the dark center of the largest galaxy. A black hole.

At first she takes great delight in this, and she tests its ability to devour with the wilted celery in the fridge, the expired mayonnaise jars, sour milk that she pours directly into nothingness. Next, it's the junk mail—all the unopened bills and bank statements—and she watches as they stretch over the event horizon before disappearing. She stands above the pan, wondering if she whispers to it, prays to it, if some God-of-all-things will answer—perhaps some loving force who would vindicate her pain or, better still, a vengeful smiter who seeks to punish—or is she perhaps the God of this universe, the large, hovering being outside of it all?

She walks through the house, filling her arms with the small, forgotten things he hasn't taken yet: a photo album, juggling balls, a pair of shoes. Each thing whirls and stretches into the central darkness of the pan, but the largest of them, the photo album, catches on the corners, so she carefully carries the pan in one hand, album in the other, to the bathroom and pours her galactic stew into the tub. It takes nicely to the shape, expanding to fill the porcelain bounds as though it prefers this new size. She's staring down at it, noticing what can only be the crackle of cosmic background radiation behind the drifting galaxies, when her phone rings. It's him, letting her know he'll come by for his things tomorrow.

“What things?” she asks, focusing on a dark smudge of molecular cloud.

“You know,” he says. “The things I forgot.”

She wants to say, “You forgot a lot more than your things. You forgot how to be kind, how to listen, how to be patient; you forgot how to have fun, how to compromise; so many things that you forgot—why don't you come for *those* things?” But she doesn't say any of this. Instead she fixes her eyes on two colliding galaxies, a streamer of stars like a long and delicate arm pulling them apart, and says, “Okay. Come, then.”

Later, she cries on the couch until she feels empty of everything, even tears, then she goes to the bathroom to check on the universe. It's swirling and shifting, a soup of stars, the dark, yawning center as inviting as sleep. *I wonder if I let it fill this room...* As soon as the thought enters her mind, one small star creeps, spiderlike, over the rim of the tub, followed by a rivulet of globular clusters, and she steps quickly back, slamming the door as the night sky fills the room.

He comes by the next day, and she's struck by the familiar sight of him: T-shirt from their Newfoundland trip, smell of lemongrass deodorant, wet hair. He's searching for his rock collection and has little to say to her, but she lingers close by, always in the next room. When she sees him walking toward the bathroom, his hand reaching for the door, she pauses, wondering if she should let him stumble straight into interplanetary space.

"Don't," she says.

He turns and stares, his hand still resting on the doorknob. "Why not?"

She's standing, staring back at him, feeling the weight of it all. "Just don't," she says.

He shrugs, turns away. "Still controlling and secretive, I see."

When he leaves, she can't contain it anymore. She can feel the force of the acceleration, the expansion pushing outward on the door, straining to fill the house. She opens the door, and a gush of nebulae spill out, pooling around her feet like water. Neutron stars fall to the floor like infinitely dense marbles; pulsars flicker near her head like fireflies. She will sleep tonight in this glowing, swirling stew. Let it fill her house. Maybe she can learn to wade through its currents, around the brink of its abyss, learn to navigate the coldness, the crushing chasms and the blinding light.

